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The Orchard: cultivating a sustainable public artwork in the Gorbals, Glasgow

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The Gorbals, Glasgow, has long been an area trapped in a degenerative cycle of decline and despite successive regenerative attempts,¹ promised improvements in quality of life have often been short-lived or have failed to materialise at all. As part of the latest phase of regeneration (the Crown Street Regeneration Project), over 20 artists were commissioned by the 'percent for art' initiative The Artworks Programme: Gorbals (TAPG)² to work on a variety of temporary and permanent interventions in the area. Focussing on just one of the resulting artworks, *The Orchard* (2004) by Amanda Currie, this paper documents both the process involved in creating the artwork and the myriad factors which will determine the future potential of the project.

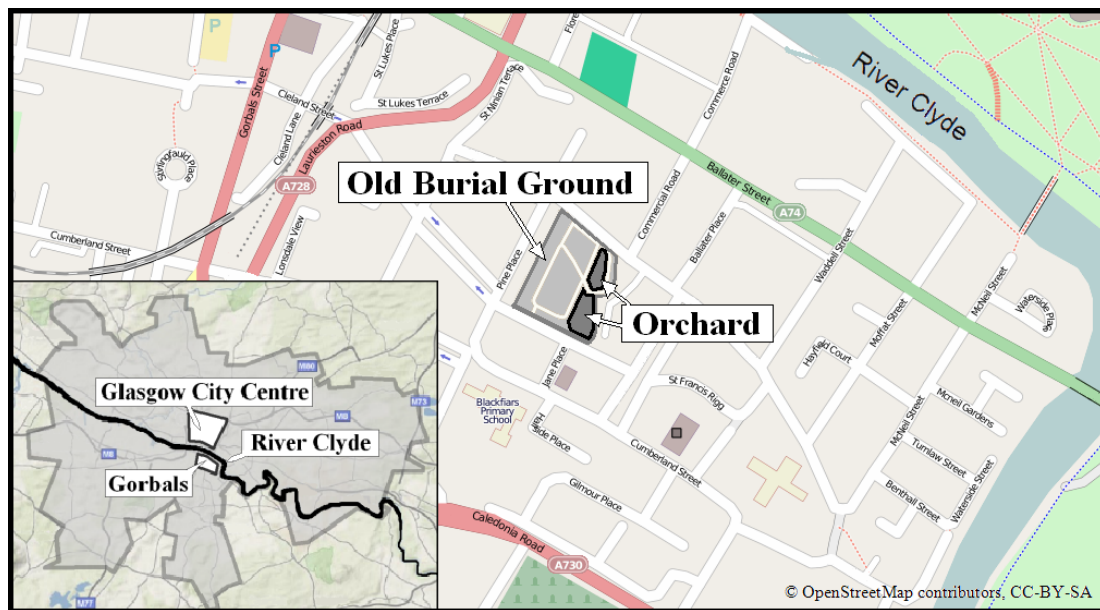


Figure 1: Map showing the location of the Orchard.

Occupying part of the Old Burial Ground on Old Rutherglen Road (Figure 1), one of the few spaces to have survived the dramatic changes witnessed in the area over the last 200 years, *The Orchard* was an attempt by Currie not only to revitalise this important local landmark with a thoughtfulness and significance it had long been denied,³ but also to recognise the role that social

history has played in shaping the local community. That the Burial Ground was owned by Glasgow City Council (GCC) was not a deterrent for Currie; on the contrary, it was even more of a pull. Currie saw *The Orchard* as an opportunity for her to influence the planning and development of a public resource with the aim of producing something not only of social interest but actually useful to local residents. Incorporating 75 indigenous fruit trees (30 varieties of apple for cooking and eating, three varieties of damson, and two varieties of quince), 300 indigenous fruit bushes (14 varieties of gooseberry, five varieties of raspberry, five varieties of blackcurrant, five varieties of blackberry, four varieties of redcurrants, and two varieties of whitecurrants), and 100 indigenous wild edible plants (including Red Campion, Common Valerian, Cat Mint, Lavender, Oxeye Daisy, Lemon Balm, Common Thyme, Chicory, Yarrow, Pignut and Chives), *The Orchard* (Figure 2) does not appear to be an 'artwork' in any conventional sense; it is a living thing which grows, dies back and regenerates with the passing seasons and is designed to merge into the fabric of the neighbourhood.

I Preparing the ground

Arts and cultural activities have a growing profile in community development and urban regeneration; however, such projects are often accused of being elitist and of failing to reflect the reality of residents' lives or aspirations.⁴ Critics have complained that artists tend to be 'shipped in' and, as a result, have only a rudimentary knowledge of the communities with which they are required to work.⁵ Inspired by the work of artist Ravi Puusemp in Rosendale, New York,⁶ and keen to deliver a work which was flexible and responsive to local needs, in 2001 Currie spent several months living in the Gorbals; talking to residents, reading local newspapers, and observing the status quo.⁷ This was a period in which the high-rise flats were still being demolished and many of the new developments had yet to be built, and Currie recalled that it seemed as though the only activity in the area was along the new shopping street. Gradually, however, she realized that beneath the surface of the regeneration there lay a deeply established network of neighbourhood life. Enthused by the apparent durability of the social and cultural life of the area despite massive

upheaval, Currie began thinking about longevity, the development of ‘traditions’, and how she might initiate a new annual event in the Gorbals – one which would look to the future whilst being rooted firmly in the past. In the course of her research Currie realised that nearly all customs stem from one of a few sources – a political event, religion, a local phenomena or a natural resource. Aware that politics and religion were likely to spark divisions rather than create something accessible to all, Currie decided to focus on nature.



Figure 2: The Orchard in Summer (with ripening blackberries and apple trees). Authors photograph, 2010.

During her stay in the Gorbals, Currie had noticed a relative absence of wildlife and imagined the sudden appearance of unusual migrating birds; a phenomenon which would undoubtedly have ignited local curiosity. Thinking about the ways in which various animals might be attracted into the area, she concluded that it would be necessary to first provide food and a habitat. It was around this time that she also started reading the work of environmental philosopher Andrew Light and, in

particular, his theory regarding the ‘urban blind spot’ in environmental ethics.⁸ According to Light, even small areas of green (or brown) space such as the orchard have the potential to (re)connect people with their local environment and to develop a sense of ecological citizenship through participation. It was when she combined her thoughts on creating a wildlife habitat with the idea of creating a natural resource that people might also be able to use, that Currie decided to plant a public orchard.

In any form of public art, “artists can find themselves pawns in a game neither of their making nor choosing, and designed to benefit abstract policy rather than real people”.⁹ Perhaps the most difficult stage in the process of realising the orchard was when the proposal was presented to Glasgow City Council Land Services (GCCLS)¹⁰ and Hutchesontown Community Council in 2002. During these meetings it became clear that *The Orchard* was enmeshed in political debates that were largely ‘unknown’, especially to those who did not have full access to GCCLS affairs. Regulations dictated that the plans could only be presented by representatives of the Crown Street Regeneration Project. Prevented from taking part in these ‘official’ dialogues, Currie was restricted to covert lobbying to elicit support for her ideas. She was aware, however, that key members of GCCLS were uncomfortable with the idea and that they had the power to disallow the whole project. These negotiations, and Currie’s subsequent collaboration with GCCLS, demanded perseverance from both sides and each was forced to trust the other in order to deliver an artwork that was of benefit to local people but which could easily be incorporated into the GCCLS greenspace maintenance programme.

Currie hoped that, by encouraging participation whenever possible, local residents would get a sense of involvement in what could easily have become a meaningless and ill-advised patch of planning. Citing the work of sociologist Richard Sennett, for example, she likened the previous regeneration attempts in the Gorbals to the way in which successive ‘authorities’ (the Emperors) had managed to violate the fabric of ancient Rome through fickle development programmes

designed only to suit themselves.¹¹ On the whole, local people, many of whom were keen to see what they saw as a sterile patch of grassland favoured by drug users given a new lease of life, were very supportive of Currie's plan. Public consultation meetings regularly attracted 30-40 people. Currie was aware, however, that this type of project often tends to attract the same committed individuals and that, even with the best of intentions, widespread community involvement and consultation is a difficult thing to achieve.¹² With this in mind, she recruited local primary schools to nurture some of the plants whilst the land was being prepared and then invited them to help plant the saplings, she posted updated plans and work schedules on the park notice board, and co-ordinated community 'marking out' and planting days.¹³ Keen to attract a diverse group of people to these events Currie also posted notices in a variety of strategic locations identified when undertaking her preliminary research (e.g. the library, the butchers, particular lamp-posts, the police station). This method of recruitment, it was hoped, would encourage individuals to participate as a result of a shared interest rather than an affiliation to a particular grouping.¹⁴

II Tending the crops

Continuity is crucial for public art, not least because projects like *The Orchard* pose a challenge to traditional arts funding and support systems which tend to be "built around time-limited installations and exhibitions in controllable spaces".¹⁵ For example, less than five years after their installation all but a couple of the artworks created under the auspices of the Glasgow *Five Spaces* programme (a project contemporary with TAPG) had fallen into disrepair despite the programme's "appeal to more solid, durational materiality".¹⁶ This was partly because budgets only covered running costs for two years; however, it can also be attributed to a significant processual breakdown which occurred in the run-up to the artworks' installation which left local residents feeling excluded from the decision-making process, disaffected, and unable or unwilling to invest in the long-term sustainability of the projects.¹⁷

Following *The Orchard's* completion in August 2004, Currie continued to play an active role in the project co-ordinating a series of informal gardening sessions,¹⁸ and has maintained contact with the volunteers even though her original aim was to pull back completely once the orchard was established. In October 2004, as agreed, official responsibility for the orchard was handed over to GCCLS. This transfer was not without its problems (including inappropriate use of weed-killer and damage to fruit trees by GCCLS staff) and it soon became apparent that the orchard's success would depend heavily upon the efforts of GCCLS employees to maintain (and improve) channels of communication amongst those responsible for the area's preservation. Since 2004, however, the orchard has been sustained in large part by the efforts of the small band of committed volunteers who meet fortnightly to clear away weeds and prevent the area from becoming too overgrown and unkempt.¹⁹

Towards the end of 2008, feeling overwhelmed by the amount of work required to maintain the orchard and concerned that GCCLS were not paying enough attention to the site's specific requirements, the volunteers enlisted the help of their local councillor in order to re-establish contact with the relevant GCCLS representative. At the resulting meeting (held in the local supermarket boardroom), it transpired that staff changes within GCCLS had caused lines of communication regarding the management of the orchard to become fractured or brake down entirely. In an attempt to remedy this situation, a second meeting was organised on the site of the orchard itself, first, to discuss what GCCLS should be doing to help maintain it and, second, to emphasize the importance of a good management programme both in terms of fostering an ethic of care amongst the diverse range of user-groups who visit the site on a regular basis (including fruit-pickers, dog-walkers, children, art enthusiasts) and in raising the profile of the site amongst those who represent the community (e.g. local Councillors, council workers, members of the local Housing and Residents' Associations). Since then, GCCLS staff have made an effort to respond to the volunteers' requests and it is hoped that, from now on, they will continue to assist with the care and maintenance of *The Orchard* on a seasonal basis. As the volunteers are keen to stress, for much

of the year the orchard needs only minimal (if regular) input; it is in the late Summer and Autumn that the orchard is at its most labour intensive when the fruit needs harvesting and the summer weeds and dead matter need clearing away in order to stimulate new growth.

III Harvesting the produce

In 2004, it was impossible to predict the impact of *The Orchard* and it is likely that the artwork's local significance will remain undetermined for a number of years. Widespread efforts were made to include local residents in the planning and implementation of the project but, as Sharp highlights, the materiality of an art form as end product also has "consequences for the art's subsequent incorporation into the urban fabric and for its ongoing 'consumption'".²⁰ The fruit bushes began to produce fruit almost immediately but even the birds were slow to react to the orchard's presence in the first year and much of it rotted on the bushes. In subsequent years, however, the orchard has attracted a variety of wildlife into the area; the most notable being a large flock of Waxwings (a relatively rare winter visitor to the United Kingdom which thrives on a diet of berries) which visited in December 2007. Local residents have, perhaps, been even slower to respond with many people failing to realise that they can help themselves, despite efforts by both Amanda and the volunteers to broadcast that the orchard carries no access restrictions. These efforts have included talking to people during the gardening sessions, occupying a stand at the annual Gorbals Fair and, in 2009, the founding of an annual 'Damson Harvest' day during which people were invited to help pick the fruit, procure recipes, and obtain more information on the orchard. In September 2010, at an event geared towards 'harvesting and healthy eating' organised by a local primary school in collaboration with the volunteers, children were encouraged to try different jams made from the fruit, to pick the ripe damsons and red/white currants and to eat them straight from the tree/bush, an activity which elicited yelps of delight, cries of amazement that you could actually do such a thing, and either delighted chatter or shrieks of disgust depending on whether the berries they chose were sweet or tart.

The number of people using the orchard to procure 'edibles' (be they fruit or herbs) is still relatively small, although anecdotal evidence suggests that numbers are increasing year on year. More broadly, the presence of the orchard does seem to be attracting a diverse range of publics to the Burial Ground and has become a popular spot for dog-walkers, young children who like to play in the tall grass, and those who simply want a peaceful place to sit. It is perhaps inevitable, however, that the activities of some users clash with the hopes and desires of those emotionally invested in its future sustainability. For example, drug users are known to frequent a spot at the back of the orchard which is hidden from the main path by the trees, and in 2010 many of the apple trees were seriously damaged by children climbing up to get the fruit which they then threw at passing cars. In response to the latter, the volunteers (supported by a local Councillor) are now liaising with a local youth centre to set up a pilot gardening session during which the young people will be encouraged to develop an interest in, and sense of ownership over, a site which 'belongs to them'²¹ as members of the community.

The Orchard is undoubtedly the sum of its parts; the result of a great many strategic but also creative partnerships. As such, it demonstrates the potential of an appropriately conceived and well-managed arts project which actively involves local residents in helping to shape the development of their immediate area and encourages them to invest in its future. Yet, simultaneously it highlights the problems that frequently beset this type of public art even when due consideration is given to good process and long-term sustainability. The work of the volunteers, however small their numbers may be, and their success in making connections with various local stakeholders²² is an indicator of an enthusiasm for the project amongst the people who live and work in the Gorbals. Without this group *The Orchard* would have been in danger of 'derailment' as little as two or three years after its completion, despite the site being a locus of activity/interest for a diverse range of user-groups and its relevancy to ongoing debates regarding the renewal and revitalisation of the Gorbals neighbourhood area. One cannot assume, however, that future community members will feel the same sense of ownership over the site.²³ Likewise, it is unavoidable that much of Amanda's

time is now devoted to other projects, that volunteers may move away, and that individual volunteers will gradually become incapable of carrying out the levels of physical activity that the site's ongoing maintenance requires. It is clear then that the future of *The Orchard* can not (and indeed 'should not' given the agreement drawn up with GCCLS) rest entirely upon the shoulders of the artist and this small enthusiastic group.

Work needs to be done on raising the profile of *The Orchard* not just amongst local residents, but also amongst potential stakeholder groups in the neighbourhood (schools, community groups, greenspace/nature organisations, etc.), and the wider Glasgow 'art public'. Yet, where the responsibility for this will lie (given the varied interests at stake in relation to the site's multifunctional status of 'natural resource', 'recreation area', 'urban greenspace', 'artwork') remains unclear and there is a danger (due to lack of funding and current over-reliance on the skill-set of the volunteers) that any efforts will be piecemeal and/or determined by individual interests. Perhaps the most important determinant of the artwork's future sustainability, however, will be the level (and duration) of commitment invested by GCCLS; indeed, it is hard to see a long-term future for *The Orchard* without some form of sustained partnership between the local authority and the volunteers, and an on-going programme of outreach within the local community. At the moment, the artwork is still a small part of a larger political jigsaw, enmeshed within a web of (frequently opaque) management structures which make it difficult for 'outsiders' to determine who holds direct responsibility for it, and may ultimately leave *The Orchard* vulnerable to neglect or subject to the homogenous nature of the GCCLS greenspace maintenance programme as key staff change roles or leave the organisation and gaps appear in the collective memory of the project. That said, given the current economic climate, *The Orchard* is also at the mercy of increasingly restricted funding streams which are likely to stymie the efforts of even the most committed GCC employee. Seven years on, it is still impossible to determine what the future of the orchard will look like; rather than follow the path taken by *Glasgow 1999's Five Spaces* one hopes that it will emulate Alan Sonfist's *Time Landscape* planted in 1978 in Manhattan, New York.²⁴ Located on city-owned land

and cared for by New York Parks Department in collaboration with local volunteers, this site-specific forest of native flora has become a permanent part of neighbourhood life and is widely recognised as a benchmark in urban environmental art.²⁵

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¹ See M.Thompson-Fawcett, 'Reinventing the tenement: transformation of Crown Street in the Gorbals, Glasgow', *Journal of urban design* 9(2) (2004), pp.177-203.

² 'Percent for art' is an internationally recognised mechanism whereby developers are encouraged to allocate a percentage (usually one percent) of the costs of a new development to the commissioning of public art. The TAPG (1999-2005) was one of the largest ever seen in the United Kingdom.

³ Although many headstones remain around the low boundary wall, the site (dating back to 1715) was cleared of burials and landscaped in the 1960s.

⁴ P.Carey and S.Sutton, 'Community development through participatory arts: lessons learned from a community arts and regeneration project in South Liverpool', *Community development journal* 39(2) (2004), pp.123-134; C.Murray, 'The artist as place maker', in E.Allington and S.Patterson, eds., *Re views: artists and public space* (London, Black Dog, 2005), pp.163-167.

⁵ J.Sharp, V.Pollock and R.Paddison, 'Just art for a just city: public art and social inclusion in urban regeneration', *Urban studies* 42(6/5) (2005), pp.1001-1023.

⁶ In 1975, Puusemp ran for Mayor of Rosendale, New York. His campaign for election rested on offering realisable solutions to problems which had badly effected and demoralised the community. During his two years in office he took the town from extreme material poverty to positive wealth and co-ordinated the repair and maintenance of long-term water supply and sewage problems. One of the ways in which he did this was

to develop a series of highly participatory community groups to address problematic social and local community issues. At no point did anyone guess that this was a covert work of fine art and he withdrew as soon as he judged the artwork complete. The 'work' is now widely recognised as an example of the power of art to effect real positive change politically, socially, and communally. A.Kaprow, 'The real experiment (1983)', in J.Kelly, ed., *Essays on the blurring of art and life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1996), pp.201-218 (p.201); A.Webster and J.Bird, 'Celebrating the streets' (n.d.a.), <http://www.andywebster.info/texts/atrustoryramble.doc> (site accessed January 2005).

⁷ Currie's approach was supported by TAPG which encouraged all the artists to take the time necessary to both speak and listen to the place before 'making anything'. Lead Artist Matt Baker acknowledged that this approach required courage; "the temptation is always to have a ready-made answer hidden up your sleeve, rather than having the confidence to take the time necessary for the work to suggest itself". M.Baker, 'Afterword', *Arcade: artists and place-making* (London, Black Dog, 2006), pp.147-148 (p.147).

⁸ A.Light, 'The urban blind spot in environmental ethics', *Environmental politics* 1(10) (2001), pp.7-35; A.Light, 'Elegy for a garden', *Terrain.org: a journal of the built and natural environments* 13(Fall/Winter), 5 pages.

⁸ L.Leeson, 'Art with communities: reflections on a changing landscape', *ixia: public art think tank* (2008), <http://www.ixia-info.com/director/loraineleeson.htm..>

⁹ L.Leeson, 'Art with communities: reflections on a changing landscape', *ixia: public art think tank* (2008), <http://www.ixia-info.com/director/loraineleeson.htm>.

¹⁰ Now Glasgow City Council Land and Environmental Services.

¹¹ R.Sennett, *Flesh and stone* (London, Penguin, 2003).

¹² Sharp *et al*, 'Just'.

¹³ Whilst these events were co-ordinated by Currie, assistance was on hand from Kelvin Clyde Greenspace, the Scottish Wildlife Trust, and GCCLS operators.

¹⁴ It is important to recognise, however, that non-participation in formal activity does not necessarily indicate disinterest.

¹⁵ S.Lacy, 'Introduction', in S.Lacy, ed., *Mapping the terrain: new genre public art* (Washington, Bay Press, 1995), pp.19-47 (p.34).

¹⁶ The *Five Spaces* project formed part of Glasgow's year as UK City of Architecture and Design in 1999 and brought artists, architects and local communities together to develop five urban spaces around the city centre

periphery. The project represented a desire to show that *Glasgow 1999* was not simply about events and museums in the city centre, generating tourist revenue, or bolstering business interests; rather, it was about participation and creating opportunities for local communities to set their own agendas. J.Sharp, 'The life and death of five spaces: public art and community regeneration in Glasgow', *Cultural geographies* 14 (2007), pp.274-292 (p.284).

¹⁷ *Ibid*, Sharp *et al*, 'Just'.

¹⁸ These sessions tended to attract around 12 regular volunteers.

¹⁹ This group includes around six regulars, two of whom bring their children along to help.

²⁰ Sharp, 'life', p.277.

²¹ Elizabeth Jackson, Personal communication, 2010.

²² Including, Glasgow Community and Safety Services, GCC Countryside Ranger Service, New Gorbals Housing Association, Glasgow Greenspace, and the Community Council.

²³ Sharp, 'life'.

²⁴ Like *The Orchard*, Sonfist's artwork required extensive dialogue with city planners and community groups before permission was granted. Whilst developing his ideas Sonfist organised public meetings to discuss the project and eventually enlisted local school children and residents to assist with planting.

²⁵ Lacy, *Mapping*. Although, three decades on the success of this venture is still subject to local debate. See K.Bloomgarden-Smoke, 'Cleanup time for Time Landscape indigenous garden', *The Villager* 77(17) (2007), http://www.thevillager.com/villager_230/cleanuptime.html.